

## Alarming engagements?

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## **Alarming Engagements? Exploring Pro-Anorexia Websites in/and the Media** **Anna Lavis**

'Anorexia's got nothing to do with my body.  
The physical bit's just a symptom of my mind'  
*Eva, inpatient*

### **Introduction**

In our online interview, Aurelie<sup>1</sup>, who has created and participated in a number of pro-anorexia websites since the year 2000, offered me their history:

Pro-Anorexia (pro-ana) started in 1998. The very first one was started by a person whose screen name was Empressanorexia\_nyc. She started the group on Yahoo called Anorexia with Pride (AWP). It is unknown how, at that time period, many other folks came across it and decided to start their own. It expanded to other various hosts (i.e. MSN, Excite, E-groups) until attention was brought to it from other eating disorder recovery sites. Soon, the webhosts of those sites started banning and deleting any clubs and groups.

Variously referred to as 'pro-ana' or 'proana', pro-anorexia websites are, most simply speaking, established and participated in by individuals living with eating disorders. Since the advent of the twenty-first century, pro-anorexia websites have generated a plethora of words across print media, television and cyberspace. They have also featured in fiction (Ellis 2012; Halse Anderson 2009) and memoirs of anorexia (Mikhaylenko 2012), as well as engendering both academic and popular discussions (see Black 2012; Uca 2004). However, despite the ebb and flow of their visibility across these diverse moments of 'public culture' (Ortner 2006) and the media imaginings that coalesce around them, definitions of pro-anorexia websites vary.

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<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

*Urban Dictionary* defines them as ‘a type of website that promotes anorexia’ and their participants as ‘someone who thinks anorexia is a lifestyle and gets help from a web community to achieve his/her goals’<sup>2</sup>. A recent academic study has likewise argued that they ‘encourage knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours to achieve terribly low body weights’ (Borzekowski et al. 2010: 1526). Yet, on the homepage of a pro-anorexia website the creator writes that this is ‘a place where people with eating disorders can distribute advice and support without censorship’, and this aspect of support has also been highlighted in academic analyses. Although nominally pro-*anorexic* - with anorexia as the diagnosis around which most discussions and desires coalesce - to the sites there is a definitional fluidity; participants may have diagnoses of - and seek support for - anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, EDNOS<sup>3</sup> and may also transition between these during the time in which they engage with these websites. Mirroring this heterogeneity of definition and diagnostic fluidity, it is unclear how many pro-anorexia websites there are. A recent estimate put their number at 400-500 (Bond 2012) but, as Aurelie states, since 2001 the large global servers have shut down websites making any references to pro-anorexia (see also Reaves 2001). This has led the sites to continually reappear in different guises or make themselves more hidden. Pro-anorexia websites have historically shared certain key elements, which are: discussion forums; food avoidance advice, known as *Tips & Tricks*; journal entries; clinical information about anorexia, bulimia and EDNOS, often taken from the DSM-IV (APA 1994) and *Thinspiration*, which consists of photographs of starving bodies and, sometimes, celebrities. However, these features are no longer the sole domain of pro-anorexia websites; they also leak into the wider landscape of the Internet. Since it became a public site in 2006, *Facebook* has seen an

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=pro+ana> [accessed 8<sup>th</sup> March 2013]

<sup>3</sup> Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified.

emergence of groups calling themselves pro-anorexic, and these have been subject to enforced closure by the site's administrators. *Tumblr*, *Instagram* and *Pinterest* also witnessed a wave of content terming itself pro-anorexic, which led to all three to ban this in early 2012 (Barnett, August 2012; Daily Mail, unattributed, March 26<sup>th</sup> 2012). Or rather, we might say that they banned what they *regarded* as pro-anorexia but, crucially, this is not as simple as it might seem. When tropes that are traditionally part of pro-anorexia websites, such as *Thinspiration*, appear in other cyber spaces, they accrue and transmit very different meanings from those they have on the websites. On pro-anorexia websites themselves, moreover, there is also now an increasing multiplicity to their meanings. What 'counts' as pro-anorexia - and indeed is counted in determining the number of the websites - varies according to the imaginings of pro-anorexia, and indeed of anorexia itself, that are being drawn on. Despite the perpetually-changing, multivocal nature of the Internet, this heterogeneity cannot be attributed only to the medium itself. Rather, it highlights what it is that requires exploration about the relationships that exist between pro-anorexia websites and the media coverage that frames and, even, performs them.

Therefore, to explore these websites in/and the media, this chapter draws on a selection of social and news media from the earliest reports in 2001 to current ones in 2013, alongside data from anthropological observations and interviews on pro-anorexia websites (2005-2013) and in an English eating disorders inpatient clinic (2007-2008). Whilst being careful not to unthinkingly transfer meanings between diverging spaces of social action, this ethnographic data is employed to respond to a recent suggestion that 'little is known about why people use [pro-anorexia websites]' (Bond 2012); by contextualising website participants' online practices in wider articulations of anorexia as 'valued and visible' (Schmidt and Treasure 2006), it offers an alternative portrait of pro-anorexia websites to those most

often found in the media. Yet, these diverging ways of seeing the sites are not presented only as tales of binary opposition. Rather, holding participants' voices in the same analytical space as media coverage elucidates how the media are *part of* the story of these sites; it reveals their role in the interactive processes through which 'pro-anorexia' has been fractured, multiplied, but also fixed by the words that mire it in controversy.

Traversing a layered textual, virtual and actual landscape in analysis also echoes how participants themselves navigate online and offline worlds; many have been – or, in the case of some of my interviewees, may concomitantly be – in eating disorders treatment. This glimpse into clinical realities also serves, importantly, to remind us that anorexia may be 'dark and dangerous and [leave] a shell of a human being in its wake', as John Evans writes in his memoir (2011: 19). To recognize that anorexia is valued, and even actively maintained, by individuals is not to ignore the distress or ambivalence many feel, and which is also central to pro-anorexia websites. As such, addressing something as complex, intimate and socially taboo as pro-anorexia necessitates acknowledging the extreme danger posed by the illness whilst also taking account of the voices of participants to the sites. This chapter therefore attempts an 'active listening that challenges the listener's preconceptions and positions while at the same time it engages critically with the content of what is being said and heard' (Back 2007: 23) by individuals who maintain their anorexia on the Internet.

The chapter begins by tracing the alarm present in media coverage of pro-anorexia websites, which views them as populated either by 'victims' or 'predators', before turning to explore the contrasting complexities in participants' own descriptions of why they visit the sites. Participants' accounts elucidate how desire and ambivalence are conjoined as pro-anorexia may signify both a response to, and reconfiguration of, conditions of possibility already

compromised by anorexia. Yet it is also in the context of the value placed on this existing illness that we see how, to participants, pro-anorexia websites are not simply about achieving a thin body. Rather, in highlighting a sense of stasis and the importance of ‘authentic’ diagnosis, they draw our attention to the specific ways that thinness comes to be valued *within* anorexia. Contrasting this to the imaginings of anorexia, bodily thinness and an assumed relationship between these, which underscore much reporting of pro-anorexia websites, illustrates that interactions between the media and the websites are looping rather than linear. The media’s words have been active, altering the landscape of the sites and redefining pro-anorexia and even anorexia itself, over the last decade in surprising and, even, harmful ways.

### **‘Predators’, ‘Victims’ and Media Imaginings**

During interviews conducted online with participants to pro-anorexia websites, a number of my informants explained that after a spike in media attention, such as that following a press release put out by the UK Eating Disorders Association (now B-eat) in 2006 (Bloomfield 2006), the pro-anorexia websites in which they participated often had an influx of visitors posting vitriolic hate mail. One such message during fieldwork in 2011 read: ‘you dumb idiots I hope you die’. In a slightly more empathetic vein, another visitor wrote, also in 2011:

This is absolutely sickening! It's one thing to lose weight, but to get so thin that your ribs and bones stick out is just revolting. Guys may flirt with you now, but when they see how sickening you're gonna get they will be scared of you. Oh god, if only you'd listen to someone. You need help!

These messages suggest that the first question we might pose is: what is it about pro-anorexia websites that incites such passionate responses to them? It is arguably not sufficient to propose that the answer lies in their name - that being *pro*-anorexic inherently makes what

has been termed ‘the dark world of pro-anorexia websites’ (Doward and Reilly 2003) more dangerous than the rest of the seething ambiguity that is cyberspace. Pro-anorexia websites are part of a wider ‘medicalization of cyberspace’ (Miah & Rich 2008; see also Gibbon and Novas 2008), which forged an intimacy between biomedicine and the Internet early in the latter’s history. Cyber peer-to-peer interactions among individuals with, especially chronic, health conditions have been widely documented (Fox 2011; Ziebland and Wyke 2012) and the re-evaluation of medical knowledge intrinsic to any sense of being *pro-anorexic* is found in those spaces as well as in earlier offline patient groups (cf. Kellener 1994). It is also now possible to ‘find a community to which you can listen or reveal yourself, and instant validation for your condition, whatever it may be’ (Elliott 2004: 217). Hence, there are currently many cyber ‘biosocialities’ (Rabinow 1999) around conditions, belief systems and practices also normatively regarded as ‘harmful’. Suicide, apotemnophilia (see Elliott 2004) and self-harm, for example, are all the focus of websites embodying a similarly ambiguous mix of support, ‘expertification’ (Epstein 1996), desire and encouragement. Yet, although these have hit the headlines (cf. Manning 2012; Townsend 2013), pro-anorexia websites have incited more media alarm. Thus, perhaps what we really need to ask is: what is it that the media says about pro-anorexia websites that incites vitriolic reactions of the kind noted above?

Media discussions over the last twelve years have commonly dually positioned participants to these websites - as unknowing victims of a disease they do not realise they have or as predators luring others into a ‘cult’ (Courtney-Smith 2006) of anorexia within which disease is denied. ‘Sick’ (Wostear 2007; also Gotthelf 2001), ‘porn’ (Goodchild 2006), ‘macabre’ (Doward and Reilly 2003) and ‘revulsion followed by a kind of morbid fascination’ (Reaves 2001) are all descriptions in British newspapers that have fallen into the latter of these poles. Positioning pro-anorexia websites as predatory aligns them with wider cultural

and media discussions of the Internet as a dangerous space - even a seductively sexual dangerous space. Labelled as 'literally killing people' (Daily Mail, unattributed 2007), the sites have been called 'sinister online groups' (BBC, unattributed 2005) focused on the 'promotion of anorexia and competitive dieting' (Laurance 2012). Justifications for, and illustrations of, this seductive danger are habitually drawn from two particular aspects which are held up as the sites' central features; these are *Tips & Tricks* and *Thinspiration*. I will explore these later in the context of informants' narratives and particular focus will be given to *Thinspiration* as the moment at which website participants' voices and media imaginings encounter one another in generative ways.

*Tips & Tricks* comprise advice on how to avoid food, forget hunger and hide starvation's physical effects. An example is: 'Spoil your food. As soon as you've cooked your meal, put too much salt, pepper, vinegar, detergent or perfume on it. That way you won't want to eat it'. Referring to such *Tips* a media report, which was part of the surge of interest following the Nominet Trust-funded report into pro-anorexia websites in 2012 (Bond 2012), stated:

Worryingly, pro-ana sites do not stop at simply encouraging thinness [...]. They also take an active approach by offering tips on weight loss, dieting and how to maintain an eating disorder, for example, telling readers how to avoid detection from their friends and loved ones. As well as encouraging the use of diet soda, diet pills and cigarettes to suppress the appetite, some pro-ana websites even hold weight loss competitions among their subscribers' (Girtz 2013).

As this article demonstrates, there has been a prevalent media emphasis on these sites as competitive (cf. Asthana 2007; Catan and Bennett 2007; Howard 2007; Wostear 2007), replete with 'desire to be the 'best anorexic'' (Atkins 2002). In the UK, *The Independent*



recently encapsulated this stance, stating that they encourage: ‘young girls to post pictures of their stick-thin bodies to drive one another into losing dangerous amounts of weight in competitive and sometimes startling ways’ (Independent, unattributed 2012). Such claims have been accompanied by first-person accounts of being an ‘internet anorexic’ (Lipinski 2007), describing ‘group fasts’ and ‘diet pills, laxatives, diuretics’ (ibid. 63). This focus on competition positions pro-anorexia websites not only as spaces that make individuals who already have anorexia more ill, but also that *turn* those without the illness into anorexics, luring them into the entrapment of eating disorders; it is suggested that they ‘seduce girls into anorexia’ (Levenkron in Dolan 2003). Such representations resonate with wider media imaginings of mental illness as societally dangerous (Thornicroft 2006, esp. chapter 6) and, like those depictions of ‘feared’ or ‘deviant’ illness, they remind us that ‘any disease that is treated as a mystery and acutely enough feared will be felt to be morally, if not literally, contagious’ (Sontag 2002: 3).

Exchanging the words ‘disturbing’ (Gregoire, September 2012; Morris 2002; Piotrowski 2013) and ‘twisted’ (Brown 2001) for ‘disturbed’ (Wostear 2007) and ‘troubled’ (Doward and Reilly 2003), the second frequent pole of media representation focuses on unknowing ‘victims’ who are ‘pushed’ (BBC, unattributed 2007) into anorexia - presumably by the ‘predators’ described above, which splits participants into two distinct groups. Illustrated by a 2007 article in *The Sun*, this depicts the sites as ‘a disturbed community of anorexia sufferers who rely on sordid internet information to help them lose weight’ (Wostear 2007). Such coverage echoes wider discussions of the influence of the Internet on behaviour and, in particular, of women as somehow ‘intrinsically’ more susceptible to media influences than men (see Bell 2009; Bray 1996), which also emerge in debates around size zero. As such, this coverage is underpinned by particular assumptions regarding the gender and age make-

up of pro-anorexia websites. There is a clear adherence to referring to these as ‘aimed at teenage girls’ (Atkins 2002) and to describing the participants in this way (cf. Catan and Bennett 2007; Driscoll 2012; Gotthelf 2001). Yet, whilst the majority of participants are female, some are male. Age, on the other hand, varies widely and the sites are certainly not only visited by adolescents. During their interviews, many informants who were between 30 and 40 years of age recounted visiting pro-anorexia websites every day, sometimes for hours at a time. However, this population tended not to post or upload, their engagements thus leaving no trace. It is their silent participation in the sites that begins to tell us a different story from the media binary highlighted so far. Within that - the framing of ‘victims’ as becoming ever more anorexic, prey to the encouragement of other participants, and ‘predators’ as encouraging, and even *turning*, others - there is a sense of movement; seeing pro-anorexia websites as spaces in which to ‘achieve’ - or produce in others – extreme thinness frames them as teleological. Yet, ‘hanging around’ on the sites every day, even if not positing, hints at a different temporality; it speaks of stasis, stillness and even entrapment and these are crucial to an understanding of what pro-anorexia websites mean to those who participate in them.

### **Stasis and Illness: Maintaining Anorexia in Cyberspace**

In her online interview, Nancy said of her participation in pro-anorexia websites: ‘because we're at a place that already knows tips/tricks, blah blah blah... we just talk’. This word ‘talk’ arose in many informants’ descriptions of cyber-interactions that encompassed friendship and mutual support. These involved ‘discussing things off the telly’, as one informant put it, as much as sharing experiences of anorexia. Non-anorexia-focused and anorexia-focused contents thread together on pro-anorexia websites in a ‘storied sociality’ (Stewart 1996: 9) and this mix also weaves through their more formalised aspects, such as journals written by

the *webmistress/master* (creator) or participants. At times these are 'innocuous, dealing with mundane adolescent concerns' (Giles 2006: 464). At others, they may be poignant admixtures of pain, pride and both a desire for, and hatred of, anorexia. As such, many informants echoed one participant, Leanne's, words when she argued that pro-anorexia websites are 'not like some evil cult trying to brainwash people into starving themselves it's about giving people support in some of the toughest times of their lives'. Likewise, Laura said: 'I am sick of people talking about how terrible pro ana sites are. In my lowest times I spent endless hours in the chatrooms...just being happy that there was someone who understood what I was going through and cared if I was sad'. Like Laura, informants described the value of the sites as lying in such understanding and lack of judgement.

That pro-anorexia websites can be 'a sanctuary for those already suffering the illness, a place where they can share their thoughts on anorexia away from the pressure of family or friends who may encourage or enforce recovery' (Burke 2009: 63 – 64) has been recognised both in academic analyses (cf. Davies & Lipsey 2003; Dias 2003; Pollack 2003; Wilson et al. 2006; Yeshua-Katz and Martins 2012) and some media coverage (Brown 2001) as far back as the websites' early days. This recognition also lay behind the British Eating Disorders Association's (now B-eat) decision not to back a proposed ban of the sites (see Bloomfield 2006). However, as a spokeswoman for the US National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) recently suggested, offering a 'sense of belonging' (Mysko in Gregoire September 2012) and support to participants also 'validates their experiences' (ibid.). The sharing of affects and desires that is part of the websites' 'storied sociality' (Stewart 1996) serves to legitimize participants' feelings about anorexia, personhood and relationships between these. Such exchanges can therefore, as the media has argued, deepen existing anorexia. In normalizing the illness, they have the potential to lead participants to not seek

other forms of help (See Bardone-Cone & Cass 2006; Mulveen & Hepworth 2006; Tierney 2006; Wilson et al 2006). This 'negative enabling' (Haas et al. 2011) was recognised by informants during their interviews. In hers, Nora wrote: 'I get both support and motivation if someone is going too far the community would say something but what is too far? If I wanted help I wouldn't be looking up pro ana websites so people who are on those sites want to be supported to continue with the illness'.

This process of normalization has frequently been equated in media coverage with denial of illness, leading to claims that 'pro-ana refers to the rejection of the idea that anorexia nervosa is an eating disorder' (Udovitch 2002). It is suggested that participants have 'no idea of the potentially deadly consequences of developing anorexia nervosa' (Bloomfield in Catan and Bennett 2007) and that 'the site owners don't mention (probably because they don't know themselves) the risk of osteoporosis, the effect on fertility and the hugely increased risk of heart disease or heart failure' (Bloomfield 2006). Such narratives rest on, once again, an erroneous binary construction. This assumes that pro-anorexia *must* constitute a denial of illness because illness *cannot* incite desire; if they knew the dangers – the realities – participants simply *could not* want anorexia. Viewing pro-anorexia, thus, as underpinned by 'choice', such media coverage resonates with neoliberal paradigms of responsible citizens; to be rational and responsible, participants to these sites simply 'cannot' know what they are doing. However, this is not supported by participant observation on the sites. Instead, in line with more recent press coverage (cf. Gregoire September 2012), and as the prevalent trope of support suggests, participants 'know of the dangerous consequences associated with their behaviours but this does not deter them from continuing' (Williams and Reid 2007: 150). Many pro-anorexia websites contain detailed warnings of anorexia's dangers and inform participants how to identify particular bodily symptoms that suggest that their illness 'has

gone too far'. Similarly, there is advice on how to stay alive and maintain a certain level of health *with(in)* - crucially not without – anorexia. This consists of information regarding vitamins and heart health for example. As such, as one website creator put it during fieldwork, pro-anorexia is about 'accepting the side effects but attempting to simply stay alive'. This bleak binary offers a glimpse at the ambivalence that pervades these websites, which draws into question neoliberal notions of 'choice' emphasised by media coverage.

In her interview, Josie wrote: 'I have lost quite a few friends to eating disorders and I live with the physical consequences of anorexia and personally believe that pro ana sites should be made illegal because then at least fewer people would be motivated even more to continue an eating disordered pattern'. And yet, at the time of her interview, Josie was a frequent visitor to the websites and wrote passionately about how she would be 'lost' and 'alone' without them. Josie's ambivalence towards the sites ensues from, and mirrors, that towards the illness itself which was expressed by many informants. In their interviews, as on the websites, articulations of pain and distress shared space with pride at anorexia and a desire to maintain it. Even outright hatred of anorexia does not preclude pro-anorexic desire in informants' narratives; the former may even, paradoxically, underpin the latter, which was illuminated by Lois's interview. Describing why she strived to maintain anorexia, she said: 'well, I have to be good at something'; and that something, to Lois, was anorexia. This sentiment of adapting to a *lack of* choice by being 'good at' the illness you have is echoed across pro-anorexia websites. Participation in these therefore emerges as being about living – 'making do' (de Certeau 1984) - with existing illness rather than being a clear-cut expression of choice or 'lifestyle' preference. Materializing here is a key point that has resonated throughout the ethnographic data so far: pro-anorexia websites are not underpinned by the

desire to *get* an illness, or even to *get better at* it. They are, rather, all about living through, and holding onto, one's existing diagnosed anorexia.

Many pro-anorexia websites have information sections outlining clinical nosologies of anorexia, bulimia and EDNOS. These comprise listings, usually derived from the DSM IV (APA 1994), of diagnostic criteria for each. They are accompanied by 'what to expect' paragraphs, which discuss the physical and mental symptoms that 'fulfil' these criteria. In their interviews, some informants recounted a daily practice of (re-)comparing their somatic selves to these criteria to check they were 'still anorexic'. It has been suggested that 'classifications' such as medical diagnoses 'change the ways in which individuals experience themselves' (Hacking 1999: 104; see also Rose 2007). However, the temporality within these discussions varies from engagements with diagnostic categories on pro-anorexia websites; the latter are affirmative, not generative. Diagnosis – at its first bestowal as well as at every processual moment of checking thereafter – offers a space to be, as one informant put it, 'stereotypically anorexic'. Through it, personhood and anorexia (re-)merge in ways that are felt to be already subjectively present and yet which become 'legitimately' clinical. The pervasive discourse of authenticity - or, of what we might call 'authenticity-through-biomedicine' - in these engagements demonstrates that pro-anorexia websites are 'biosocialities' (Rabinow 1999) formed around *existing*, clinically-diagnosed, anorexia. As such, informants' accounts illuminate a disparity between the temporality attributed to these sites by the media and by participants themselves. Whilst the former frame them as spaces of teleological competition to become ever-thinner, the latter describe them instead as allowing participants to live through, and maintain, an existing illness. Participants' narratives therefore do not evince a current lack but, rather, a sense of stasis. To many, pro-anorexia websites are spaces in which they can be alone with illness, unhindered and un-judged. Taking

account of this temporality of existing anorexia is therefore crucial to any consideration of the sites. Helping participants hold onto and even be 'good at' an illness that many described as a friend (see Lavis 2013 A) whilst also knowing how much it damaged them, emerged as the central reason for being on the sites. This shifts how we read features of pro-anorexia websites that are often framed by the media as producing inter-subjective competition.

In her interview, Nancy said of the pro-anorexia website in which she participated:

It's not a place where others encourage one to be sick, it's a place where one can

talk about their woes and what they ate in knowing there's others who are in the

same place. In another words, we're really talking to ourselves with an echo of 'oh

gawd, I did the same'.

Although here 'talking to oneself' resonates with the support explored above, in other informants' accounts it elucidated how competition works on the sites, showing it to be intra-not inter-subjective. In her interview, Laura said:

The pro ana sites help to encourage me to be a 'good' anorexic because they often give tips on how to avoid social meal situations and also give tricks on how to hide food etc if you cannot avoid meals.

Here *Tips & Tricks* do not emerge as modalities of 'turning' others anorexic or, indeed, of making individuals who already have the illness more anorexic, as the media has emphasized. Rather, against the background of participating in the sites to hold onto existing illness as a way of living with it and being 'good at something', *Tips & Tricks* can be seen as ways to negotiate the day-to-day realities of needing food without losing anorexia by eating 'too

much'. As such, this is an intra-subjective competition against one's own hunger to maintain and 'live up to' diagnosis. This was also clear when Kyra recounted how every time she visited a new pro-anorexia website she searched for biographical information about the website's creator to check how much they ate and weighed. She described feeling: 'Like I needed to be able to "compete" with them'. Whilst Kyra's words highlight how competition is within the space of one's own anorexia, they also begin to hint at the way in which thinness enters this dynamic of intra-subjective competition in ways more nuanced than the media might imagine.

In informants' accounts, thinness emerged as a marker of anorexia's continuing presence (see Lavis 2013 B) rather than as a goal of self-starvation. Many described measuring the size of wrists or thighs, checking today's bodily emaciation against yesterday's, in order to see whether anorexia was 'still present'. Measuring their thinness - both against themselves and others - constitutes a way for individuals to check that, with the help of *Tips & Tricks* perhaps, they have 'successfully' held onto anorexia and still fit the diagnostic criteria. As such, bodily thinness *comes* to be important *within*, or *after*, lived experiences of diagnosed anorexia rather than being an aim of the self-starvation in anorexia. But, it is here, along the body's corporeal perimeters and their visual representation in the form of *Thinspiration* that one of the central encounters between media imaginings and pro-anorexia websites takes place. Having explored prevalent media portrayals of the sites as well as listened to participants' voices, we can now turn to trace the threads of echolalia, engagement, and enactment woven through this encounter. In so doing, the final part of the chapter shows how media representations of anorexia-as-thinness become 'lines of flight' (Deleuze & Guattari 2004) inscribed with a desire that problematizes participants' own



conceptualizations of pro-anorexia and even undermines their lived experiences of the illness itself.

### ***Thinspiration* and Misrepresentation: A Cyber-Landscape Alters**

In their interviews, many informants discussed *Thinspiration*, a widespread feature of pro-anorexia websites. Although, at first glance, *Thinspiration* pages may appear to comprise photographs of, simply put, ‘thin people’, a closer look tells a more complex story that resonates with participants’ sense of already-compromised conditions of possibility and the liminal position of thinness in their narratives. Describing her viewing of such images, Nora suggested that ‘thinspirational pictures of actual anorexics play a big role in these sites’. Nora’s words are crucial to an understanding of *Thinspiration*’s significance both to pro-anorexia websites and to the day-to-day lives of their participants. On these sites ‘pictures of actual anorexics’ take two forms; the first is in images labelled *Diagnosed Anorexics* or sometimes, *Admitted Anorexics*. These depict celebrities who have ‘come out’ as anorexic, usually by going into treatment, and are often divided into before and after shots. Yet, unlike in advertisements for plastic surgery or diet products, celebrity *diagnosed anorexics* are lauded for looking the same at these two time points. Their corporeal consistency in visual thinness is, as noted above in relation to my informants, a marker of continuing anorexia. About this genre of *Thinspiration*, Kyra wrote:

I looked for not just slim models, but bony ones, ones that look ill! Like the size zero and even more for more double zero actresses. Like when Nicole Ritchie and Lindsay Lohan were really skinny and Portia de Rossi was pictured on some red carpet and from behind you could see her ribs.

Kyra’s predilection for images of individuals ‘that look ill’ is important; in line with the discourse of authenticity around diagnosis, it is a legitimately *anorexic* thinness that is key to

making these photographs *Thinspirational*. As Nora put it in her interview, ‘if I know that the person that I’m looking at is anorexic then it appeals to my competitive side and encourages me to starve myself’. This emphasis on the ‘authentic’ visuality of anorexia is also found in the second sub-genre of *Thinspiration*, which comprises photographs of participants themselves. In her interview, Laura wrote:

I think it’s important to have pictures of emaciated people and not just thin people because it’s a reminder of what I am aspiring to be...I don’t want to be thin I want to be emaciated and often the only place to find anorexic looking pictures is on these pro ana sites.

As Laura’s words suggest, the recognition that pro-anorexia websites are spaces in which participants can ‘be’, and work at being, diagnosed anorexics is central to how a specific ‘ill’ thinness of *Thinspiration* enters subjectivities of desire. Thinness is aspirational – and I argue, *only aspirational* – when it delineates this ‘authentic’ pathology-identity; as Kyra put it, ‘pro-anorexia is the desire to remain *eating disorder thin*’ (italics mine). This desire, therefore, is focused on the process of holding onto one’s existing eating disorder where that presence is *measured* through thinness; it does not have generic ‘weight loss’ as a goal.

However, as noted in Part One, *Thinspiration* has been ubiquitous in media coverage of pro-anorexia websites. Emptying these images of their inflections of stasis and pathology-identity, the media has tended to focus on the viewing of ‘celebrity bodies’ as inspiring weight loss. Assuming that website participants desire to mimetically ‘sculpt’ their own bodies, the media has suggested that ‘pro-anorexic sites have often held up certain celebrities as examples of “thinspiration”’ (Howard 2007: 15). Such coverage positions *Thinspiration* as nothing more than ‘photographs of slim (or, indeed, skinny) celebrities and models to serve as motivation for young anorexics to starve themselves’ (Closer, unattributed 2009; see also

Burton 2012; Goodchild 2006; Nicholl 2011). This interpretation of *Thinspiration* as centrally *about* thinness and pro-anorexia website participants as a ‘body-obsessed audience’ (Daily Mail, unattributed, 21<sup>st</sup> March 2012) can be traced back to very early media coverage, which described ‘photos of waifish models and actresses’ (Dolan 2003) and ‘pictures of excessively thin people’ (BBC, unattributed 2001) that ‘glamorise thinness’ (ibid.). As such, it arguably shaped public imaginings of pro-anorexia websites early on in their history and this conceptualisation has continued to solidify over time.

Thus, website participants and the media read *Thinspiration*’s images in very different ways. That these are seen by the latter as contagious – illustrated by discussions of ‘predators’ explored above – and also as one-dimensionally about thinness offers insights into media imaginings not only of pro-anorexia websites but also of anorexia nervosa. To claim, for example, that ‘Victoria Beckham is revered as a “thinspiration” by women with anorexia’ (Wilson, E. 2006) entangles both anorexia and the websites into wider discussions of weight loss and, specifically, of size zero (see Atkins 2002; Howard 2007; Spencer 2006; Wilson, E. 2006). This was sometimes pointed out by informants themselves; in her interview, Miriam, an inpatient in the eating disorders unit, said with frustration:

There’s lots of people who think it’s just a vanity thing like, you know, anorexia is just the thinness and wanting to look thin but it’s not a vanity thing, it’s not at all. People go ‘oh everyone’s trying to copy this size zero trend’ and it’s not, it’s not! You don’t open a picture...look at a picture, and say ‘oh I must look like that girl, therefore I must lose weight, therefore I’m an anorexic!’ It’s absolutely nothing to do with that.

The merging together of subjectively and temporally different thinnesses that such media discussions enact blurs any felt and lived distinction between anorexia and dieting. It overlooks the centrality of a relationship between what is seen and what is felt when website

participants engage with *Thinspiration*. It thereby flattens and ignores the specific desirability of ‘anorexic emaciation’ as a marker of legitimate anorexia, and the ways in which this comes to be important through the conditions of possibility set out by existing illness. As such, media coverage resonates with what Jodie Allen has termed the pervasive cultural ‘spectacularization of the anorexic subject position’ (2008). Allen argues that certain media portrayals of anorexia posit an ‘end-stage’ and ‘ahistorical’ body as ‘the *ultimate* signification of *the* anorexic subject position’ (Allen 2008: 589, *italics in original*). This, she suggests, incites desire in individuals with anorexia for the subject-position embodied in this end-stage body. In relation to pro-anorexia websites, this is both true and yet not. Certainly media discussions of *Thinspiration* do engender desire but, importantly, *not* in individuals already living through anorexia. Rather, they make pro-anorexia desirable from what we might term ‘outside anorexia’ by advertising the illness as a means-to-an-end teleological ‘weight loss’ tool and pro-anorexia websites as the places to ‘go and catch it’. This is rendered more powerful by the fact that it is still not uncommon for media discussions to cite the names of the websites themselves (cf. Gotthelf 2001; Robinson 2012).

In her interview, Laura demonstrated the advertising potential of media coverage when she said: ‘I have always known that pro ana sites existed because I had seen them mentioned in the media’. Putting Laura’s words in context for us, Aurelie, whom we met at the beginning of the chapter, wrote:

Why there are ever expanding members since it started? If you look back, the newspapers/TV talk shows/news/magazines merely glorified it. Nowadays, it seems like it is being seen as a fad. If you want to be cool and lose weight fast, be anorexic. And given the huge media attention, all these youngsters these days will simply google them up.

The ‘youngsters’ Aurelie describes are commonly called *wannarexics*, both on pro-anorexia websites and in the media. As Boero and Pascoe write, ‘the wannarexic treats anorexia as a fad, something that can be adopted and discarded at will’ (2012: 39). It was about these new visitors to the websites that *ana\_girl\_empath*, a pro-anorexia blogger and researcher, who kindly shared her thoughts with me in online conversations in 2012-13, wrote:

The Wanarexia Phenomenon is the unfortunate self-fulfilled prophecy of Mass Media. Wanarexics were scarcely seen before the first wave of serious condemnation in 2001. Before this, ProAna had an inconspicuous presence online; only those who already had ED's were likely to come across ProAna content. After awareness and condemnation of the Movement was presented to the masses, we began to see a vast influx of individuals who did NOT have ED's but either 1) coveted ED's because of an impression that ED's are ‘cool’ or ‘fashionable’, and therefore literally, actively trying to create an ED in themselves; and 2) people hoping to garner ‘tips and tricks’ to lose weight.

After being visited by *wannarexics* during fieldwork in 2012, the homepage of one pro-anorexia website read: ‘we have seen a disturbing influx of individuals drawn to [our site] for the wrong reasons and a distortion in the general conceptualization of what ProAna is all about’. The use of the word ‘distortion’ here is interesting, and key to an understanding of how the media has actively and concretely altered the landscape of pro-anorexia websites.

*Wannarexics* not only transiently visit these websites to ask how to be anorexic and lose weight. Rather, just like existing participants, these new visitors also ‘hang around’ and they do so in ways not always so silent. In fact, participant observation on the sites demonstrated that *wannarexics* both initiate and join conversations as well as uploading and exchanging what they regard as *thinspirational* images; these latter alter the character of

*Thinspiration* pages, exchanging a focus on legitimately anorexic emaciation for one on weight loss. As far back as 2004 *Ana's Girls*, a book describing itself as *The Essential Guide to the Underground Eating Disorders Community Online*, charted this emergence of two types of *Thinspiration* with completely opposing meanings, suggesting: 'Thinspiration may be more or less graphic. Groups that aim for emaciation will be more likely to display photographs of women suffering from malnutrition whereas groups that aim for a more mainstream ideal of beauty will post photographs of celebrities such as Britney Spears' (Uca 2004: 14). As more content becomes focused on celebrities' thinness, the temporality and emphases of pro-anorexia websites alter; ways to become thin replace those to 'make do' (de Certeau 1984) with existing illness. In contrast to the 'storied sociality' (Stewart 1996), described above, the sites' multi-dimensionality, complexity and ambivalence flatten into a quest for size zero and thigh gaps. As such, it is *after* the media and from *outside* anorexia that it begins to *become* true that on pro-anorexia websites 'there is often extreme or dangerous dieting advice given which promote harmful behaviours' (Bond 2012: 2). Moreover, as the media reports on this new differently-shaped teleological 'pro-anorexia' as *the* pro-anorexia, more *wannarexics* flock to the sites and this 'new pro-anorexia' solidifies into 'fact'. Writing about *wannarexics*, Aurelie argued: 'a lot of folks in these groups are really teeny boppers, teens, young adults who don't know what they're getting into'. In her emphasis on the unknowingness, age and gender of participants, as in her use of the verb 'glorify' above, we see that in this media-generated process of change, both the participants to, and contents of, pro-anorexia websites become what the media always claimed them to be. As such, in the relationship between pro-anorexia websites and the media, 'it is the map that engenders the territory' (Baudrillard 1983: 2). Furthermore, as the lived, contextual and ambivalent pro-anorexia of website

participants is overlaid in this way, the word 'pro-anorexia' is reconfigured and repopulated not only on these websites, but across the landscape of cyberspace.

Just before *Pinterest* banned content it regarded as pro-anorexic in 2012, *The Daily Mail* drew attention to this by arguing that individuals 'who post pictures of emaciated women as a way to encourage fellow die-hard dieters' (Daily Mail unattributed, 21<sup>st</sup> March 2012) had infiltrated *Pinterest*, which it described as 'another fertile breeding ground for pro-anorexia' (ibid.). Likewise, a spokesperson from B-eat told *The Telegraph* in 2013 that 'it's worrying that with the powerful medium of social networking and the growing popularity of phone apps such as *Instagram*, people are able to easily access images that encourage the individual to believe that an eating disorder is a lifestyle choice and to avoid treatment' (Philipson 2013; see also Styles 2013). Although illustrating, once again, the ways in which the media pervasively blurs a desire for weight loss with anorexia, these reports also tell a further story. Here, they not only (re-)produce this textually through their own reporting, but also document the blurring as it takes place across cyberspace. Thus when a headline reads, 'those caught up in thigh gap obsession have plenty of fuel for their mania', and the article describes how *Tumblr*, *Twitter* and *Facebook* all have 'pages devoted to posting images' (Miller 2013), and it terms these 'pro-anorexic', they are – of sorts. This 'new pro-anorexia', thus, spills across the web, coming to life in other spaces and forms of media, taking on increasing solidity in each incarnation. This seepage is also not limited only to online worlds; a search of 'pro ana' or 'pro-anorexia' on *Amazon.co.uk* uncovers texts such as *All Things Thin and Beautiful: Discover A Whole New Meaning to Pro Ana* (Martin 2012) and *Beauty Is Slim And Lean: Living PRO ANA The Healthy Way* (Charles 2013). The ways in which such spaces and texts utilise this new form of 'pro-anorexia' suggest, moreover, that as a new pro-anorexia is defined and brought to life across these diverse forms of media, so too is a 'new anorexia'.

I argued above that media interpretations of *Thinspiration* as about nothing more than the quest for bodily thinness simplistically elided anorexia with a wider cultural obsession with dieting and weight loss. Now emerging from, and held up by, this cyber-landscape that claims pro-anorexia as its own is a simulacrous, 'spectacular' and 'hyperreal' (Baudrillard 1983) anorexia - one that is indeed focused on dieting and weight loss and which privileges the visual over the subjective. Like the dislocated, emptied 'new pro-anorexia' that frames and invigorates it, this is a de-relational anorexia of surface, invested with, and related to, nothing but bodily thinness. It is, to borrow from Deleuze, 'a hecceity [...] as opposed to a subjectivity' (Deleuze 2007: 130) and one, moreover, that clashes both with informants' lived experiences and with clinical realities and categories. With the 'hecceity' comes a subject position desired and inhabited by *wannarexics* but refuted by pro-anorexia website participants themselves who risk being left out - abjected even - by its pervasive online presence. Thus, *Wannarexcs*, and the new media-generated pro-anorexia and anorexia that come increasingly to life around them, are argued by pro-anorexia website participants both to threaten their 'identity and well-being', as David Giles (2006: 472) has highlighted, and to harmfully (re-)shape public perceptions of eating disorders. The *wannarexic*-desired 'new anorexia' is felt to undermine the status of anorexia nervosa as legitimate illness, thereby ignoring the suffering and lack of choice that accompanies individuals' lived experiences of it. Thus, although pro-anorexia website participants find themselves unable to control either the media or the imaginings of anorexia and pro-anorexia that it engenders and circulates in 'public culture' (Ortner 2006), they do attempt to keep these out of pro-anorexia websites, thereby limiting the extent to which they may vie for space with participants' own eating disorders. In a conjoined patrolling of clinical and cyber boundaries thus, and in contrast to



press imaginings of ‘predators’ turning ‘victims’ anorexic, there has been a frustrated and hostile response to *wannarexics*.

In our online discussions during fieldwork, Ana\_girl\_empath, whom we met above, suggested that:

Many Admins of ProAna Communities have taken a proactive stance against the accessibility of wanarexics to our Communities. Contrary to popular (media-propagated) misconception, ED sufferers do NOT want to recruit ANYONE to the path of pathology. The Wanarexic Phenomenon is highly disturbing and offensive to most ED sufferers, and many communities go out of their way to deter such individuals from staying.

As Ana\_girl\_empath’s words suggest, visitors to the sites asking how to become anorexic to lose weight are widely discouraged; the tagline to one site reads: ‘do not visit our site or forum if you are hoping to develop an eating disorder or wish to lose a few pounds. We believe that an eating disorder does NOT constitute a lifestyle choice, but a terrible and life threatening disease’. As this quotation elucidates, discouragement often highlights the horror and pain of anorexia, accentuating the very aspects of the illness on which the websites’ key trope of support centres. And, just as those discussions mingled pain, pride and a sense of authenticity, it is this triangulation that reappears here. In opposition to *wannarexics*, participants emphasize their own subjectivities of having ‘always been anorexic’ and having ‘no choice’. In her interview, Aurelie said: ‘in the Pro-Anorexia groups these days, mainly it’s all about learning HOW to have an eating disorder. What they don’t understand is that you can’t GET an eating disorder’. Both the clinical legitimacy and equally real suffering of diagnosed anorexia, which we saw earlier, here become a modality of boundary patrolling. They denote *wannarexics* as other, unwelcome and ‘inauthentic’. As one informant in the eating disorders

unit who was also a pro-anorexia website participant, Elle, put it in a discussions of *wannarexics*: 'If you're anorexic, then you do not need tips on how to not eat'. Authenticity through diagnosis is thus discursively re-solidified and and(re)inhabited against 'outsiders'.

It might have been noticed that the tense of this discussion has been in the present both 'before' and 'after' the media-generated alterations to the landscape of pro-anorexia websites and the anorexia(s) that vie for space in this ever-shifting terrain. Such linguistic mingling ensues from, and draws attention to, the fact that such changes are not one moment events. They are, rather, continual processes that have been absorbed into the dynamics of these websites, causing their participants to continually react against them. Yet, alongside the boundary patrolling of existing pro-anorexia sites, there has also been a more permanent alteration to their landscape, which does require some differentiation between tenses. The threats felt by participants to be posed by the media-generated visitors to the sites has rendered spaces of stasis paradoxically mobile; like the evacuation of a ruined landscape, many therefore described abandoning the websites and instead joining or forming new ones. In order to distinguish these websites from the spaces of spectacular anorexia and the teleological 'new pro-anorexia', as well as to keep them hidden from *wannarexics*, many are increasingly labelled pro-acceptance rather than pro-anorexia. As Aurelie put it in her interview:

Many older and wiser members were tired of the bombarded messages of 'Help, I need to lose 10 lbs in a week' and think that if they just eat apples for a week... voila they're anorexic!!! (note the sarcastic tone) So, those folks (I'm one of them) decided to form our own forums. We coined the term 'Pro-Acceptance,' because there were all sorts of folks who are in various stages of their disorder. In these types of groups,

there are either still ravaged by this disease, in a place where they are 'living' with the disease, or is in recovery.

Describing itself as having been a pro-anorexia website but now terming itself 'pro-acceptance', one homepage advises its participants that it 'strive[s] to offer love and support to all our members in whatever they are going through in their lives. The only proviso is that to join the forum you must be suffering from an eating disorder and over 15 years of age'. The advent of pro-acceptance thus utilises diagnostic classification to maintain the presence of spaces in which those living through anorexia and other eating disorders can be alone with their illnesses in the wider context of 'storied sociality' (Stewart 1996). However, this move towards pro-acceptance also enables pro-anorexia websites to continue to more permanently transform into the media template held up for them; they (have) become 'alarming' spaces revolving around the production of thin bodies. This leaves very particular, and potentially harmful, imaginings of both pro-anorexia and anorexia intact and continuing to circulate in 'public culture' (Ortner 2006).

### **Conclusion: Alarm and the Doubling of Abjection**

In exploring pro-anorexia websites through ethnography and interviews with participants to the sites, this chapter has engaged with the complexities and ambivalence that underpin these spaces. Accounts of 'hanging out' in cyberspace have drawn our attention to the ways in which being pro-anorexic may be about living through illness and reconfiguring already-compromised conditions of possibility; it is a desire to maintain one's illness and be 'good at something' that instigates the sites' dynamics of intra-subjective competition. Such narratives pose a challenge to media imaginings of pro-anorexia websites as populated by 'victims' and 'predators' caught up in the constantly-mobile pursuit of ever-increasing anorexia. The chapter traced how underscoring this illusory binary is a conceptualisation of both pro-

anorexia websites and anorexia itself as centrally *about* thinness. By viewing this illness simply as a teleological and contagious quest for emaciated limbs and ‘thigh gaps’, the media positions the websites as spaces both formed around, and in which to ‘catch’, extreme weight-loss. Yet, as this chapter has suggested, such media imaginings are not only documentary but also performative; tracing alterations to the landscape of these websites has illuminated the (re-)shaping, reification and cultural leakage of a ‘new pro-anorexia’ and how its accompanying ‘new anorexia’ becomes invigorated and invested with desire by the media’s words. As such, within patrolled bodily perimeters, as well as across the diverse locations in which this ‘new pro-anorexia’ manifests, simulated and dissimulated, diagnosed and discursive, spectral and lived anorexias vie for space and clinical and cultural legitimacy. As this constructed and spectacular ‘new anorexia’ is sought after and inhabited by *wannarexics*, both the clinical legitimacy of eating disorders and the importance of this to individuals who are living through and holding onto these illnesses, are threatened. Importantly, in addition to problematizing any straightforward singular conceptualization of ‘pro-anorexia’ these media-generated processes can be seen to instigate a concomitant dynamic of abjection. Endangering sanctuary spaces, albeit those mingling support with ‘negative enabling’ (Haas et al. 2011), and problematizing individuals’ lived anorexia displace participants, setting them apart from their illness and themselves; they are offered no place ‘to be’ either in cyberspace or ‘public culture’ (Ortner 2006). As such, these processes arguably double the already-present abjection and entrapment ensuing from the illness itself, which participants’ engagements with the ‘storied sociality’ (Stewart 1996) of pro-anorexia websites were attempts to mediate. Thus, whilst pro-anorexia is a phenomenon boosted, produced, tangled and obscured by every word written about it, such textual performances potentially

also leave individuals with eating disorders more in need of support and increasingly hidden, as well as both doubly-bject and profoundly mired in cultural alarm.

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